

What is it that makes St. Paul's what it is? Every church, in every age, must wrestle with its basic convictions, or values, and apply them to the particular issues, needs and concerns of its people and wider community. These are the convictions, or core values, that make St. Paul's the church that it is. They represent our vision for ministry in this community.

The Good News of the Gospel: A Vision for Forgiveness, Freedom and Community.

Gospel means "great good news". What makes the gospel so great and so good? The gospel tells us that God has done for us what we are helpless to do for ourselves. Our lives are plagued by shame, guilt, fear, loneliness and doubt. We experience these because our sin has separated us from God. But God has done what is necessary to bring us back into relationship with Himself. Whereas other religions and philosophies outline what we must do to be forgiven and free, the gospel tells us what God has done. God has provided Jesus who lived a life of perfection for us and offers that perfection as a free gift. Having lived He then died as a substitute for us, suffering God's punishment in our place. He became a sacrifice for all of our sin and failure and offers forgiveness as a free gift. Consequently, by accepting these gifts in Jesus, we can be clean, free of guilt and shame, and accepted by God. The gospel means that we are given a new status as forgiven and accepted daughters and sons of God.

But there is more to the gospel than a new status. We are also given a new nature, what the Bible calls a 'new heart'. The gospel means that we can be different. We are not locked into patterns of thinking and behaving that are destructive of our lives and of those around us. The gospel is the way to ongoing change in our lives. Because God accepts us on the basis of what Jesus has done, we do not have to labor under a burden of performance. We are now free to ask Jesus, moment by moment, to change us into the people He has created us to be. Knowing that we are accepted by God enables us to look to Him for help and live for Him in gratitude rather than in fear.

The gospel means still more than a new status and a new nature. The gospel introduces a new community. God intends for His people to be vessels through whom He pours His grace, mercy, compassion and justice into a world imprisoned by selfishness, divisions, hatred and alienation. As His people are changed, they together, become the means by which God changes the world around us. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was 'powerful in deed and in word' (Luke 24:19). The ministry of the gospel is to reflect both of these things. As we experience more and more of the mercy of Jesus we expect that mercy to flood the world around us bringing hope to the hurting, comfort to the suffering and safety to the marginalized.

It is this understanding of the gospel that we expect to permeate our individual lives and the entire life of this church. The gospel is the DNA of this church. It is not simply something we believe, a set of ideas. It is our life and hope. The remaining values flow from our understanding of the gospel.

The Glory of God: A Vision for the Honor of God's Name

The most important question one can ask is "Why does anything exist?" Until that question is answered, life remains uncertain and even frightening. God has created the world and you so that He might display His glory, show the wonder of His majesty and share the beauty of Himself with those he loves. We believe that human beings are created in His image and likeness. We are made with a capacity to know and delight in God. Because this is true, we cannot know lasting happiness and fulfillment apart from Him. We are convinced that the deepest desires of our hearts are satisfied as we come to love and worship the God who has made us.

In the fourth century the African bishop Augustine said: "You have made us for yourself, O, God

and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”His words are still true. The worship of God is our ultimate goal. The gospel introduces us to this God and the inevitable result of experiencing His glory, majesty and beauty is worship. We worship as we do because we believe that liturgy reflects these qualities in God and enables us to increase our capacity for enjoying Him. Liturgical worship also serves to connect us to the past. It gives us a sense of history and our place among the generations of believers who have preceded us.

The Final Authority of the Bible: Finding a Place to Stand

In a day of conflicting beliefs and intellectual uncertainty it is comforting to know that God has revealed Himself and spoken to our needs and concerns. We believe that God has made Himself known in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is the record of God’s actions in rescuing us from sin, guilt, fear and uncertainty. It is also our final authority in all matters of faith (what we are to believe), desire (what we are to love) and practice (how we are to live). We seek to preach and teach the whole of the Bible and to live our lives according to this standard believing that, as we do, we will experience more and more of the freedom and joy Christ has purchased for us.

Centrality of Prayer: Learning to be Dependent

As a community of faith, we are very conscious of our sin, weakness and dependence. Because this is true, we believe that prayer must be a central feature of our individual lives and our life together. Prayer expresses dependence upon God to meet our needs. It is also a way for us to express our gratitude to Him for His goodness to us. Further, in prayer we praise Him for His glory, majesty and beauty. Prayer is not a way for us to wrest what we want from a reluctant God. God has given us the gift of prayer so that we might participate with Him as He accomplishes His purposes for the world and us.

A New Community: An Oasis in the Desert

We live in a world characterized, increasingly, by isolation, mobility and loneliness. The gospel creates a new community that welcomes all people, without regard for race, gender, status, culture, struggles, doubts or fears. A gospel-centered life is never merely individual nor is it self-centered. The gospel creates a community in which we become a family-part of one another and other-centered. We are firmly committed to affirming the God-given value of each individual. We desire to build strong marriages and families and we affirm the unique and special role of single women and men in our midst.

We pray that our community will be a tangible expression of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world: a place where the life and power of King Jesus touch every area of life. We seek to follow Jesus in such a way that our lifestyle is different, characterized by mutual support, encouragement, love and care, especially for the weak, outcast and alone. We long for our community to be a visible manifestation of the on-going ministry of Jesus. We long for mercy, compassion and justice to be experienced by all whom the Lord brings to us. We do this not so that we might be seen or recognized, but because this is how God has related to us. Our desire is to be for others what He has been for us. We aspire to be servants: servants of one another and servants to the community in which we live.

The Priesthood of All Believers: Seeing Value in Every Person

A critical and defining feature of this New Community is our belief that every person in our midst is a minister. Whether male or female, young or old, single or married, rich or poor, strong or weak, every person at St. Paul’s has much to contribute to our well being. Our desire is to strengthen every member of our fellowship, encouraging and equipping each person in the use of

all of his or her abilities, so that the entire congregation benefits.

An Outward Face: Having Real Love for Our Neighborhood, City, Region, Nation and World

We have tasted the good news of forgiveness and freedom found in Jesus. We do not want to keep this to ourselves. We long for all people to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'.

Evangelism is 'good news-ing'. It is telling people what we have found, inviting them to 'find' it with us. We want evangelism to permeate everything we do. We expect that all of our actions and activities will be 'overheard' by people who don't believe or who don't know what to believe.

Our vision extends beyond our desire to see individuals come into relationship with God. We long to see churches started all over our city, state and world that will spread this good news. We expect to help form church planting teams and use our resources to birth, encourage and otherwise help dozens of congregations in and around Orlando.

Our vision extends beyond our denomination, as well. As we are able we are resolved to be a resource to our sisters and brothers in other denominations as they seek to plant churches and grow them to maturity.

Cultural Engagement and Renewal: Seeking the Welfare of the City

We desire to show the world that the church is committed to the well-being of the society around it. We believe that we are to be engaged in every area of culture: medicine, law, politics, the arts, etc. We believe that the gospel is the power to transform individuals and neighborhoods through ministries of word, mercy and justice. Jesus was marveled at because He was powerful in both His words of truth and His deeds of compassion. We endeavor to live as He lived, trusting that our world will experience the same renewal that Jesus brought to His day.

A Commitment to Discipleship: A Commitment to Maturity and Wholeness

As individuals in our networks of relationships, neighborhood and businesses come to know Jesus Christ we expect them to grow in their relationship with Him. Also, every Christian, regardless of his level of maturity, has an ongoing need to be nurtured and trained for ministry. We are committed to teaching people the truths of the Bible so that our lives take on the character of Jesus. Discipleship is more than the acquisition of information or practicing certain disciplines. It is, simply, following Jesus and, in dependence upon Him, seeking to live as He lived. It is a life-long task and one that we are committed to.

Catholicity: Appreciating our Wider Family

We know that we are not the only followers of Jesus in Orlando, the nation and the world. While we do have a particular understanding of the Christian faith we aim to stand with other Christians who labor to serve Jesus. We will not minimize our differences, but neither will we allow our differences to separate us where we can legitimately work with other Christians to serve the cause of the gospel of Christ throughout the world. We would describe ourselves, first, as catholic.

We embrace the core of historic orthodox Christianity, an orthodoxy that embraces the tri-personal existence of God; the Divine-Human Person, Jesus; the death of Jesus for sinners; the bodily resurrection of Jesus; the physical return of Jesus; and the eternal life of all people, either in a condition of unimaginable blessing or terrible destruction.

Second, we are evangelical. We embrace the reformational theology of the 16th century, a theology that recovered a precious and much-needed emphasis on justification by Christ alone through faith alone, the transforming effects of the gospel, the final authority of the Bible and the glory of God.

Third, we are reformed. Our theological tradition is that of John Calvin, the Scottish Reformers, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, Charles Spurgeon and others. It seeks to honor the Triune God and affirm the Lordship of Christ over all of life. This theological understanding is summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Scots Confession and elsewhere. We believe it is best summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms.